

# NASSER'S MEMOIRS OF THE FIRST PALESTINE WAR

*Translated and annotated by*

WALID KHALIDI \*

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: These memoirs first appeared in Arabic in the Egyptian weekly *Akher Sa'a* in the spring of 1955. To the best of my knowledge this is the first English translation of them to be published. The memoirs were never finished, although in a letter from the Presidential Office in 1959 granting permission to publish this English translation, the hope was expressed that "a final chapter entitled 'The End of the Campaign'" would be finished and sent to me for translation. But unfinished, as they are, these memoirs are of great interest: they are a rare source on the late President's military thinking from the professional point of view, touching on such questions as the role of reconnaissance and of logistical and air support. They throw intimate light on the strength, organization, morale and performance of the Egyptian army in 1948, as well as on the Palestinian environment in which the revolutionary ideas of the Egyptian officers matured on the eve of the downfall of the monarchy. But perhaps most important is the way in which these memoirs reflect the President's attitudes to peace and war in general, and to the specific question of the intersection of political and military responsibility. This last aspect is significant considering that the memoirs were written immediately after (and most probably in reaction to) the massive Israeli raid on Gaza on February 28, 1955. Thus the circumstances of their publication would make the memoirs a particularly significant (because indirect) source on the President's mood in the weeks before he took the momentous decision to ask Moscow for arms, at least partly to counter the recently demonstrated power of the Israelis at Gaza. Finally the memoirs are not without a poignant irony in view of all that has happened since then and of the current situation.]

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## I

A couple of weeks ago I saw an exciting film at one of the Cairo cinemas. It was a detective story of the closely-knit, breath-taking kind Hollywood is so good at. The story had a villain, who had succumbed to the evil machinations of the devil. This villain commits murder but plans his crime in such a way that suspicion is thrown on an innocent man. All evidence seems to point in the direction of the innocent man. He is pursued with suspicious glances, and the climax is reached when he is actually accused of the crime and placed in the dock. The man loses control over himself and is almost driven to the verge of insanity. Again and again he pleads his innocence but there is no one to listen to him or believe him. Even those closest to him begin to doubt his innocence. The more he tries to defend himself the more entangled he becomes in the meshes into which he has fallen, and the more heavily does the circumstantial evidence which was so cleverly contrived bear down upon him. He is overcome by despair, and the issues of right and wrong become confused in his deeply shaken conscience. Finally, tightly cornered and under the pressure of constant suggestion, he almost confesses to a crime that he had never committed and had never even thought of committing.

This story reminded me of the case of the Egyptian army in Palestine. A defeat had been suffered in Palestine just as a crime had been committed in the film-story. But who was the real culprit in Palestine? In my opinion the crime of the Palestine war was not committed by the Egyptian army but by others. But trumped-up charges were brought against the Egyptian army and it was made to bear the responsibility for something of which it was innocent. Like the innocent man in the film the army almost believed the tragicomedy of its guilt. And the people nearest to the army — the people of Egypt and other friendly nations — were almost convinced of its guilt. In the film, matters were straightened out in an hour or so and truth prevailed. The innocent man left the dock and the murderer entered it to receive his punishment. But in the tragedy in which we lived in Palestine the terrible incubus lasted for six long dark years.

When a few days ago I stood in the Military Academy and said that the Egyptian army had not been defeated in Palestine, my intention was not to make an impassioned speech. Nor was I simply trying to raise the morale of the troops after the recent attack on Gaza.<sup>1</sup> I was describing a truth that

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<sup>1</sup> The reference is to surprise Israeli military operations carried out on February 28, 1955 against the Egyptian-administered Gaza Strip. In the first operation against a military camp three kilometres inside the Strip, fourteen (mostly Egyptian) soldiers and two civilians were killed and sixteen soldiers and two civilians were wounded. In the second, simultaneous, operation, an ambush laid six kilometres south of Gaza, twenty-two (mostly Palestinian) soldiers were killed and thirteen wounded. For details of the attack and its consequences

I had lived. I was trying to tear away the meshes in which our army had got entangled. I was trying to say quite simply that the army was not responsible for the defeat in Palestine, that the army should leave the dock and the real criminal should be held to account.

In the Palestine tragedy I was not seated among the spectators as I had been in that Cairo cinema several weeks ago. I was myself on the stage together with thousands of other officers and men. I still remember the day on which my role in the tragedy began.

We were in the month of April 1948.<sup>2</sup> The Free Officers Organization<sup>3</sup> had withdrawn into itself and was lying low, for the bloodhounds were on our tracks and were converging on us from all directions. An abortive attempt had been made in the army. The eyes of the political police were strained in our direction. The time was most inopportune for any activity, and our meetings were few and far between for we did not want to attract attention to ourselves.

I myself was engaged in completing my studies at the Staff College. But the worries and responsibilities of my work at the College could not shut out the sound of the war-drums in Palestine. There was a great deal of excitement among my colleagues and the morale, especially among the younger officers, was high. Many of our comrades in the Free Officers Organization used to come up to me stealthily to avoid observation and whisper in my ear that they intended to volunteer for fighting in Palestine. I myself was in a quandary. Should I too volunteer? Should I take off my uniform and carry a tommy-gun in my hand and join the fighting? Or should I finish my course at the Staff College now that I had already spent a whole year working for it and there was only one month left to go? About this time a group of the Constituent Committee of the Free Officers Organization met at my house, and it was decided that some of us should proceed to Palestine as volunteers<sup>4</sup> and that the rest should remain in Cairo.

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see Lt. Gen. E.L.M. Burns, *Between Arab and Israeli* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, reprint, 1969), p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> The British Mandate over Palestine was due to end on May 15, 1948.

<sup>3</sup> This was the secret revolutionary society organized by Nasser in the early 40's. The Free Officers first came into the open on July 23, 1952, the day of their successful coup d'état against Farouk.

<sup>4</sup> Two Egyptian forces had entered Palestine before May 15: (1) a force of civilian Moslem Brotherhood volunteers who entered in April and (2) a force of Egyptian army volunteers, under Col. Ahmed Abdul Aziz. The latter force, which was later joined by the Moslem Brotherhood group, entered on May 6. The size of the military force (subsequently designated the Light Forces) under Abdul Aziz has been vastly exaggerated. Lorch in his *Edge of the Sword* (London, 1961, p. 203) puts it at three battalions, while Kimche in *Both Sides of the Hill* (London, 1960, p. 243) puts it at nine battalions. In fact, according to the *Secret Report on Military Operations in Palestine in 1948* prepared by the War Office, Cairo, the

One morning I found myself at Cairo Station in the company of Abdul Hakim Amer<sup>5</sup> and Zakariya Mohieddin.<sup>6</sup> We were bidding farewell to Kamel al-Din Hussein,<sup>7</sup> who was on his way to Palestine together with other friends and comrades. We congratulated them on the opportunity afforded them to go to Palestine and promised to meet them there in the not too distant future. We also excitedly assured them that we would do our utmost in Cairo to ensure the success of their mission. The last thing that I told Kamel just before the train moved off was: "You must let me know if you need anything. I shall follow up your requests with the army and will see to it that no amount of red tape or inertia should stand in our way."

As the train slowly left the station our hearts pounded with emotion. I did not go home that evening but went instead to the offices of a daily newspaper. I asked the editor to allow me to write an article in description of the scene at the station. I sat down trembling with excitement and wrote what had happened at the station. I stayed awake that night at the offices of the newspaper waiting for the first issues carrying my article.

The first days of May passed and we were still in Cairo. But our nerves lived in Palestine. We were caught up in a vertigo of thoughts and feelings. One day we were told that our group at the College would graduate before the scheduled time, possibly as a result of developments in Palestine.

The graduation ceremony was a simple, brisk affair after which we hastened to find out where we would be posted. Presently I was ordered to join the 6th Battalion. Amer was ordered to join the 9th Battalion, and Zakariya, the 1st.<sup>8</sup> These three battalions were at the time stationed near the Palestine frontier, but we did not know for certain what the future held for us. The three of us, however, were eager to join our units at once. Our orders were

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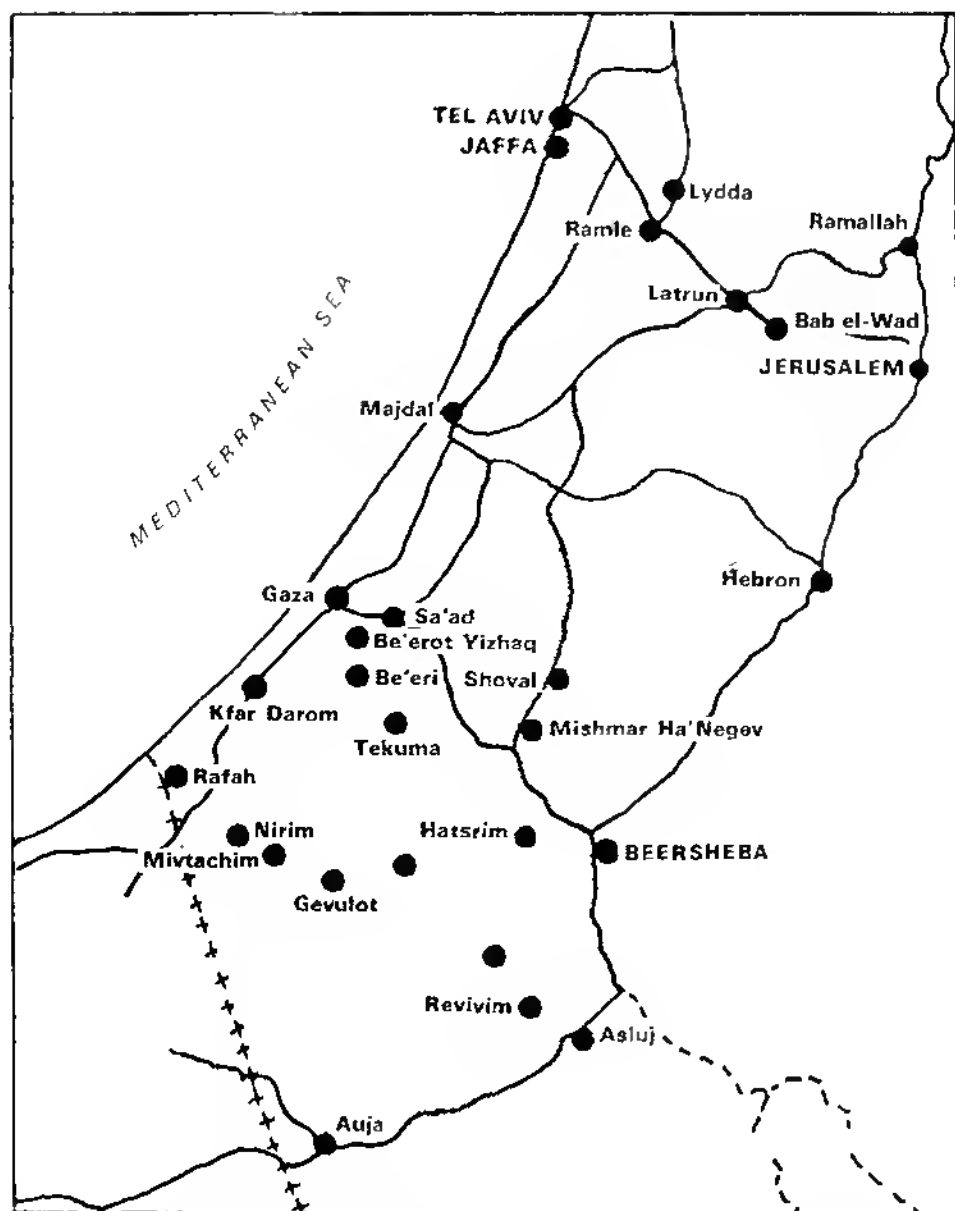
force numbered initially 124 men and 4 officers, whose task was mainly reconnaissance. By late June, the force, including all reinforcements and volunteers, numbered less than 800. Upon entering Palestine, the Light Forces proceeded to Gaza which they reached on May 11. When units of the regular Egyptian army reached Gaza on May 16, the Light Forces moved to Beersheba, which they occupied on May 19, and to Bethlehem, which they entered on May 21.

<sup>5</sup> A member of the Revolutionary Command Council after the Revolution, Amer became Field Marshal and G.O.C. of the Egyptian Armed Forces. In 1964 he was designated First Vice-President of the UAR. After the 1967 war he was removed from office and committed suicide.

<sup>6</sup> Mohieddin, also a member of the Revolutionary Command Council in 1952, long held the office of Minister of the Interior. He was Prime Minister from October 1965 to September 1966; he has been in political retirement since the latter date.

<sup>7</sup> Kamel al-Din Hussein, a Revolutionary Command Council member, had volunteered for service in the Light Forces and took part in operations under Col. Abdul Aziz in the south-east outskirts of Jerusalem. He retired from political life in 1964.

<sup>8</sup> These three infantry battalions formed the core of the Infantry Brigade Group assembled by Egypt at al-Arish on April 29. This was the regular force that entered the country on May 15.



Map 1. South-western area of Central Palestine, 1948, including major Jewish settlements across the line of the Egyptian advance described in the *Memoirs*.

that we should leave Cairo on May 16,<sup>9</sup> but so great was our excitement that we were impatient of this delay. The morning papers were full of news of what was happening in Palestine. At the same time there were various forecasts and conflicting reports as to the official stand that the Egyptian government might take on the subject. There was no specific indication in the papers as to what this stand might be. But it was beginning to appear that there was a possibility of our entering the Palestine war, and the general atmosphere in the country was overflowing with excitement.<sup>10</sup>

## II

On May 16 I left my house carrying my kit and leaving behind on a table the morning paper. The front page of the paper carried the first official communiqué of the then Ministry of Defence announcing the beginning of military operations in Palestine. I was seized by a strange feeling as I raced down the steps thinking: "So I am on my way to the front."

The car took me to the house of Abdul Hakim Amer, for we had decided that I should first pick him up and then Zakariya Mohieddin so that we should all travel together. I let the idea of the front fill all my thoughts for I wanted to concentrate on what was to come and forget altogether what I had left behind—not least, all those tears that I saw collecting as I was leaving the house and which I knew were waiting to fall until I climbed down the stairs.

The train that left Cairo on its way to the front was typical of trains of its kind in wartime: officers and other ranks in every corner, kit piled up in the passages and, for a final touch, rifles and helmets scattered everywhere. There was excitement in every gesture, word and glance. There was talk of the unknown that awaited us and into which we were about to fling our lives and bodies. At times there was talk of our comrades who had preceded us and of those we had left behind. The particular corner which Abdul Hakim, Zakariya and I occupied soon became an operational H.Q. in miniature. We had spread out a large map between us and began to discuss the situation. At first glance there loomed before our eyes the "gaps" in our position through which our lines could be threatened.

The Egyptian army at the time was made up of nine battalions.<sup>11</sup> Only

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<sup>9</sup> The establishment of the State of Israel had been proclaimed almost simultaneously with the termination of the British Mandate on May 15.

<sup>10</sup> In spite of precautionary measures taken on the frontier and the dispatch of the Light Forces, Egypt had not decided to intervene in Palestine until May 14.

<sup>11</sup> The bulk of the Egyptian army was held back in Egypt for a variety of reasons: indecision about intervention, local security considerations and utter organizational unpreparedness. The *Secret Report on Military Operations...* estimates, for example, that 60 per cent of transport available was unoperational, and that the lack of equipment for the reserves reached 90 per cent in certain instances.

three of these were anywhere near the frontier when the order was given to enter Palestine, and a fourth was on the way.<sup>12</sup> We kept asking ourselves questions. Why hadn't a larger number of battalions been concentrated near the frontier since we had decided to enter the war? Why had the reserves<sup>13</sup> not been called up and formed into new battalions that could be sent to the front when the need arose? Why did the first communiqué describe the Palestine operations as merely a punitive expedition against the Zionist "gangs"? Soon enough, however, our sense of elation would fill in these gaps to form a solid continuous front.

But our feeling of uneasiness about the weakness in our position soon recurred when our train halted at al-Arish. The external appearance of the town, sunk as it was in complete darkness, conformed at first to the stern character that we had imagined a rear base of military operations should have. But when we penetrated behind this external appearance to the heart of the military activity that should characterize a rear base, we were struck by the contradictions that we saw. To begin with there was no one at the station who took any interest in us. There was no one to tell us what we were supposed to do. We had no idea as to the exact whereabouts of our units, and there was no one who could give us this information.

We went to the area H.Q. which we expected to be like a beehive buzzing with activity. But there was no one at all in the area H.Q. It was like an abandoned house in the middle of uninhabited territory. When we finally found the officer on duty, he was looking for a dinner for himself. We shared with him the remains of the food that we had brought with us. The sound of our laughter and conversation reverberated through the abandoned building, but its echoes filled me with strange sensations.

Information reached us after dinner as to the approximate positions of our respective battalions. The 9th and 1st were at Gaza. The 6th, which I was to join as staff officer, was still at Rafah, though it had already carried out an operation against Dangour<sup>14</sup> and then returned to its base at Rafah.

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<sup>12</sup> This was the 2nd Infantry Battalion which reached Rafah on May 17.

<sup>13</sup> As Egypt became more involved in fighting in Palestine, reserve units were successively dispatched to the front. The *Secret Report* gives the following details: 7th Infantry Battalion, (arrived in Gaza, May 22), 2nd Brigade H.Q. and 4th Brigade H.Q. (Gaza, May 30), 3rd Infantry Battalion and 4th Infantry Battalion (Gaza, June 3).

<sup>14</sup> The Arabic name for the site at which the Jewish settlement strongpoint Nirim was established. Nirim was the southernmost strongpoint of a complex of some thirty such strongpoints that extended along the eastern flank of the coastal road from Rafah to Majdal. The strongpoints generally south of Majdal were under the central command of the Hanegev Palmach Brigade, while those to the north were under that of the Givati Field Force Brigade. Nirim, located some four kilometres south-east of Rafah, was one of five strongpoints overlooking or astride the coastal road from Rafah to Isdud.

It was thus that we parted. Abdul Hakim and Zakariya went in a jeep to Gaza and I went in a car to join my battalion at Rafah.

The atmosphere in the 6th Battalion was a strange one. The battalion had just returned from its operation against Dangour settlement, leaving behind some casualties on the battlefield and around the settlement. I felt that the dead left behind at Dangour symbolized the battalion's faith in the cause for which it was fighting.

I then began to listen to the details of the operation. On the night of May 14, orders were given from Cairo to the battalion to move against Dangour. There was no time to carry out a reconnaissance of the objective, nor was any information available about this objective. There was one Arab guide whose task was to lead the battalion to the site of the settlement. The guide had no information about the fortifications of the settlement or its system of defences. Such information as he did possess was vague and unspecific. All that he did was to lead the way until the fortifications of Dangour suddenly rose before our eyes.

The men were given no time to rest and ordered to attack the wire perimeter at once. No one really knew how to set about it, though the defenders of Dangour were quite clear about their job. The battalion suffered unexpected losses, and about noon the C.O. ordered it to retire from the settlement. The battalion returned to Rafah to find an official communiqué already issued from Cairo announcing that the operation of "cleaning up" Dangour had been successfully concluded.

Two features of the details that I listened to struck me in particular. The first was the leitmotif in the comments of the officers to the effect that the war was a "political" one. Much of what they saw around them seemed to fit in with and confirm this interpretation. This could not be a serious war. There was no concentration of forces, no accumulation of ammunition and equipment. There was no reconnaissance, no intelligence, no plans. Yet they were actually on the battlefield. The only conclusion that could be drawn was that this was a political war, or rather a state of war and no-war. There was to be advance without victory and retreat without defeat.

The second feature that struck me was the fantastic myth woven round the military strength of the enemy. Our forces had clearly been taken by surprise by the resistance put up by the Dangour settlement about which they had had no information whatsoever. I listened to an officer relate how electrically operated towers rose above the surface of the ground to fire at our men in all directions, after which the towers disappeared (still electrically) into the ground again.

I was not myself taking part in the conversation but could not at this point help turning to the man to ask him:



"How did you know that the towers were electrically operated? You could only be certain of this if you had gone into the settlement and examined the bases of the towers."

The officer was silent, but the myth about the electrically operated towers firing in all directions was not to be so easily silenced. In my opinion those young men were not to blame, but rather the gross and fatal lack in our information about the enemy.

As staff officer of the 6th Battalion, I soon began more than anybody else to realize the bewilderment and incompetence which characterized our High Command. A hundred factors clashed within me, and I did not know how to express my feelings. Perhaps the clearest description of our predicament was given by a private. He expressed it in his simple colloquial language, not knowing that I could hear him and unaware that his simple words summed up our position.

Orders had been received by our battalion to move camp to another site that lay about three kilometres away. I myself could think of no reason for this move, and, what is worse, I did not think that the High Command had any reason for it either. My doubts were to be presently confirmed, for three hours after we had received the first order and just as we had settled down in our new camp, fresh orders reached us to move to the station and entrain for Gaza. As we began to strike the tents we had just erected, a sergeant came up to a private who was still pitching one of the tents and ordered him to take it down. The private looked uncomprehendingly at the sergeant. When new orders had arrived to move to the station, he began to take down a tent which he had taken down in the morning in one place and had begun to erect at noon in another; now he was being ordered to take down the same tent again before he had finished erecting it and as he was doing all this he kept repeating: "Shame, shame on us." He said this in the drawn-out sarcastic intonation of the Egyptian countryside, and when I heard him I felt that the doubts about the competence and determination of the High Command which had already assailed me had also found their way to the men, and that this private's words were a simple expression of these doubts.

I boarded the train for Gaza with a heavy heart. My only consolation was that I was soon to meet Abdul Hakim at Gaza. For, as staff officer of the 9th Battalion which was stationed at Gaza, he was to hand over to me as staff officer of the 6th Battalion the positions which his unit occupied.

Abdul Hakim and I had a long talk together as we went over the positions that I was to take over. At this time there were four battalions in Palestine. The 6th was on its way from Rafah to Gaza. The 9th was preparing to leave Gaza upon the arrival of our battalion. The 1st and the 2nd were moving forward along the coastal road in the direction of Majdal.

I frankly confessed all my fears to Abdul Hakim. I felt that there was an attempt to scatter our forces. We were advancing along the coastal road and leaving in our rear fortified settlements which threatened our eastern flank and our lines of communication. Abdul Hakim left with his battalion, which had a duty to perform in the battle of Deir Suneid.<sup>15</sup> Before leaving he gave me the sum of £1000, which had been entrusted to him. With this money I was to buy as much cheese and olives as I could. Our forward troops had no emergency rations to rely on in the front-lines, where they could not be served with hot meals. No one had taken the trouble to think about providing the front-line troops with emergency rations. All that they had done was to send us £1000 and say: "Buy cheese and olives."

I bought all the cheese and olives I could lay hands on in Gaza. My heart ached at the thought of the soldier who was to attack fortified positions with his bare body and then sit in a hole like a mouse nibbling away at a piece of cheese. We bought all the cheese we could find with the £1000 they had thrown to us saying: "Do as you see fit." But my heart cried out with every beat: "This is no war."

I followed the developments of the battle of Deir Suneid from my position in Gaza, minute by minute. I could hear the boom of the guns in the distance. Our wounded started arriving in batches at Gaza Hospital. That night, the night of May 19, was the worst in my life. I spent it at Gaza Military Hospital. The beds around me were filled with our wounded from the battle of Deir Suneid, which was still in progress. Meanwhile Cairo Radio was announcing an official communiqué issued by General H.Q. in which our forces were said to have occupied Deir Suneid, which our infantry had stormed in a splendid manner. The communiqué contained a painful lie, for our forces had not yet occupied the settlement, though it was true that our infantry had carried out a splendid attack.

There stirred within me a revolt against what I heard was happening at Deir Suneid. What kind of war was this? Our infantry was being expended in a terrible way in exposed, broad daylight attacks. Bare bodies unprotected by armour were being pitted against strongly fortified positions and guns manned by competent, well-trained defenders. True that our infantry did not falter, and that as one wave was mown down, another came forward to take its place. But was this a battle into which we were leading our troops or a massacre? I could clearly visualize the position at the front from where I was at Gaza. As it turned out the Deir Suneid battle ended in victory after heavy sacrifices and in spite of all the difficulties which our forces encountered.

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<sup>15</sup> The reference is strictly to the strongpoint of Yad Mordechai (near the Arab village of Deir Suneid) just off the coastal road north of Gaza.

After the battle of Deir Suneid the 1st Battalion was ordered to move forward to Majdal and the 9th to advance on Isdud.<sup>16</sup> New orders were later given the 1st to move eastwards and occupy Iraq Suweidan, Faluja and Beit Jibrin.<sup>17</sup> As I followed these movements which the Cairo papers announced before they had actually been carried out by our troops in the field, I almost lost my self-control. I could make no sense out of any of these movements. The chief interest of our High Command, as it appeared, was to occupy the largest extent of territory possible. But the only result of this was that the four battalions were dispersed at the end of long lines of communication. They became so scattered that their main concern was to defend themselves and protect their lines of communication. Our High Command no longer had a reserve to use against the enemy. The commander of what had been a fighting force became virtually a commander with no troops to command, or at best a commander of a string of outposts scattered over a wide front. I could see that we had lost all power of initiative which of our own free will we had surrendered to the enemy.

All this that I could visualize from where I was at Gaza was also clear to the officers and men in the forward trenches and had its corrosive effect on their morale. Every soldier felt the lack of arms, but what was more significant was that he felt the lack of proper planning. Everyone felt that our G.O. had no effective control over his forces and that he acted according to the pressure of factors of which the actual requirements of the front had perhaps the least bearing on his calculations. The feeling of the men and officers was that in their isolated widely scattered positions they were at the mercy of the enemy. They felt that they formed sitting targets to a highly mobile enemy.

There was a return in the trenches to the talk about a political war. To me political war was an unqualified catastrophe, and the very idea was repugnant to my way of thinking. I knew that the experience of history had shown that no army had waged a political war without being defeated. The case of Wavell in Greece was still fresh in my mind. War must be war and the commander in the field must act according to the requirements of the field.

### III

Presently a new battalion reached the front: the 7th.<sup>18</sup> I was ordered to hand over the Gaza area to it. Our battalion was to move forward and occupy

<sup>16</sup> The entire coastal area from Rafah to Isdud lay within the territory assigned to the Arab State by the UN partition resolution.

<sup>17</sup> These three Arab villages, also located within the area of the Arab State, were on the main lateral road north of Gaza linking the coast to the Beersheba-Jerusalem road.

<sup>18</sup> One of the reserve battalions stationed in Egypt at the start of hostilities. It had reached Gaza on May 22.

the positions at Isdud. I was delighted with the new orders partly because we were at last to meet the enemy and join battle with him, and partly because I was once again to meet Abdul Hakim. For as staff officer of the 9th which was holding the forward positions at Isdud, he was once again to hand over to me, as staff officer of the 6th, the positions his unit occupied. But before we had left Gaza strange instructions reached us. We were alerted to prepare ourselves for the relief of the Arab Legion which was engaged in a battle at Bab el-Wad. But we had no information whatsoever about the battle of Bab el-Wad.<sup>19</sup> And it seemed to me rather strange that of the four battalions which we had at the front we should send one, i.e., one-fourth of our army, to an unknown destination at Bab el-Wad. Fortunately the instructions were cancelled just as we prepared to leave. Instead we moved to our original destination at Isdud where we were to meet the enemy face to face.

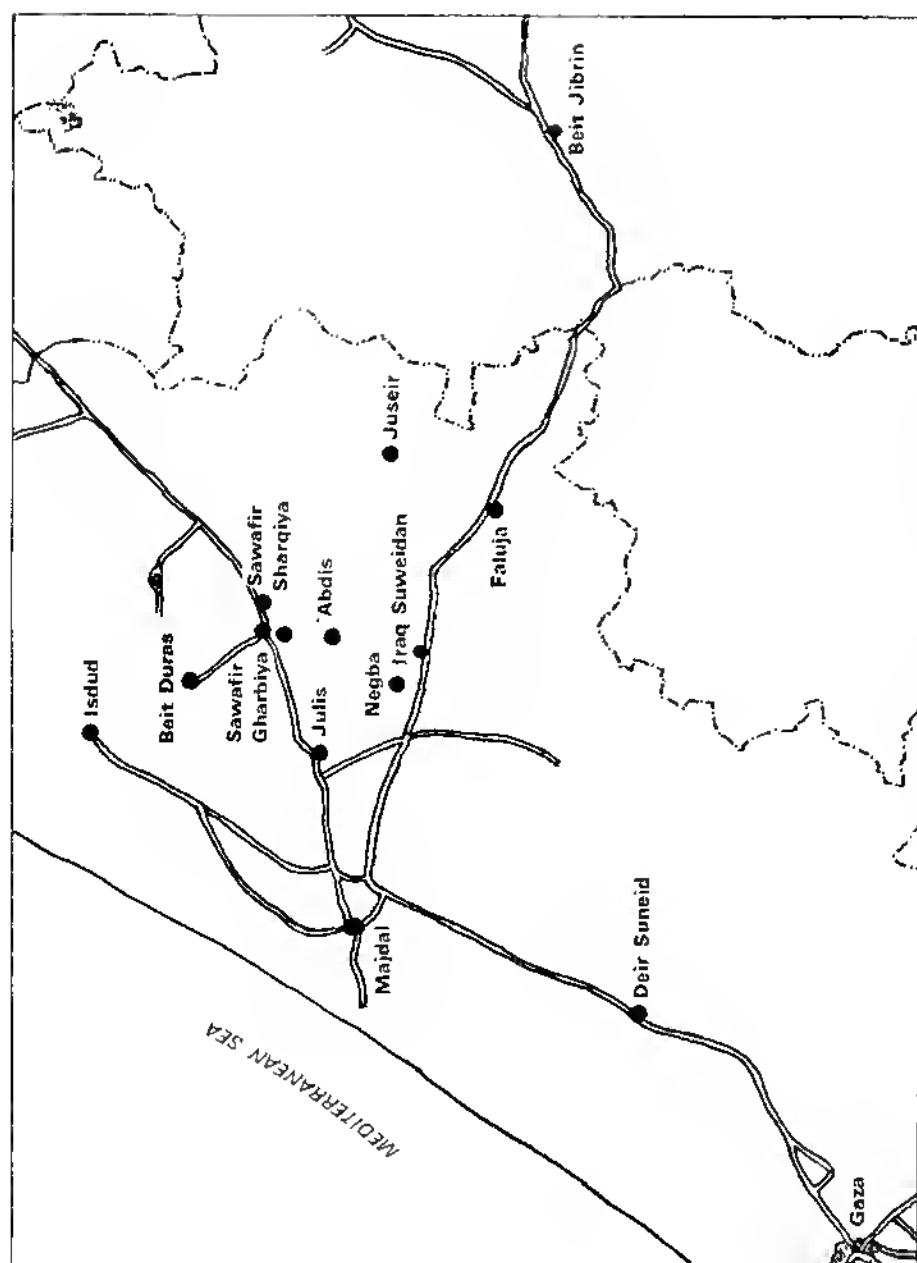
I met Abdul Hakim at Isdud. He was his smiling, confident, carefree self. I shall never forget that night which we spent together at Isdud. His bed was a trench in the ground in the middle of an orange grove. I settled down in the same trench on the other side of an orange tree. We did not sleep a wink that night. The atmosphere was strange and exciting. We were in the forward positions near the enemy. A receiving set near Abdul Hakim carried to him the latest developments minute by minute. For the first time I learnt from Abdul Hakim that there was to be an attack the following day against Nitsanim settlement.<sup>20</sup> I expressed to Abdul Hakim my anxiety lest there should be a repetition of what had happened at Deir Suneid. But he calmed my fears. He said he had learnt many lessons from Deir Suneid. He also said that the morale of the junior officers was very high. He had drawn lots among the company commanders to decide who was to lead the attack. But one company commander, Captain Mahmoud Khulaif (who was a member of the Free Officers Organization), refused to draw lots and volunteered to lead the attack with his company. Abdul Hakim left me at daybreak for the battle.

It was a busy day. I had to deploy the battalion in its new positions. I was also preoccupied with what was happening before us to the west on the coast at Nitsanim. We received intermittent news of the battle. In the afternoon we received definite information that the 9th had succeeded in its task and had occupied Nitsanim settlement. I also learnt that Khulaif, who was

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<sup>19</sup> The narrow defile through which the main road from Jaffa starts its climb to Jerusalem. The 4th Regiment of the Trans-Jordanian Arab Legion had entrenched itself on a mountain spur above Latrun (located in the Arab State according to the UN resolution and commanding the approaches to the defile). On May 25, the Jews had begun a major unsuccessful offensive to dislodge the Legion from this position.

<sup>20</sup> The northernmost strongpoint along the Egyptian line of advance astride the coastal road and commanding the approaches to Isdud to the north. It was under the central command of the Jewish Givati Brigade.



Map 2. Central area of the operations described.

at the head of the assault company, had been killed and that Abdul Hakim had not been able to restrain himself and had joined in the assault. He had been wounded by flying shrapnel but was otherwise well. This was the engagement for which Abdul Hakim received exceptional promotion in the field.

That night we continuously exchanged fire with the enemy. I could not collect my thoughts. They were circulating far above the battlefield. I was saying to myself: "We have succeeded in the battle of Nitsanim. Our officers and men do not lack courage." But this was perhaps the only encouraging aspect of the situation. Otherwise, there was only cause for anxiety. I roamed with my imagination over the whole front. I found our scattered forces thinning out the nearer they approached the front-line positions facing the enemy. Small as they were in number, they were made to cover a vast extent of territory so that they had reduced themselves to individual outposts whose primary responsibility was to defend themselves. There were no reserves that could be thrown into an attack. We ceased fighting as an army and had turned after our entry into Palestine into individual uncoordinated groups. The result of all this was that the enemy succeeded in pinning us down to our widely scattered positions. He also monopolized the capacity for movement, concentration and attack. I kept asking myself: "What made our C.O. do this? What made him scatter our forces in this manner? Why did he allow himself to advance for such a distance exposing his forces to the enemy from every direction?"

Slowly the news of the truce<sup>21</sup> began to reach us in the trenches. We received orders to cease fire at 6 a.m. on Friday, and the talk of a political war was resumed. But the enemy did not consider the war a political one. A few hours before the cease-fire was due I received information that his units had cut the road between Majdal and Isdud. By the afternoon we had succeeded in throwing the enemy out of positions on our supply route which he had begun to dig himself into. Had he stayed in these positions, he would have been able to intercept all supplies and reinforcements to us throughout the period of the truce. In the afternoon I drove a jeep to the position which the enemy had tried to occupy. For the first time I saw the dead bodies of the enemy with their equipment scattered all around them.

I stood on a ridge near this place, and once again my thoughts began to roam. Here I was on a hill in Palestine between Majdal and Isdud. The dark blue sea stretched majestically to the brink of the horizon. The red sun was dipping in a brilliant procession behind the sea. Near me were the corpses of an enemy who had tried to kill us and whom we had killed. To the east lay our scattered forces that had so far done their duty in spite of the obstacles

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<sup>21</sup> On May 29 the Security Council had called for a four weeks' truce. Both sides consented to the truce, to begin on June 11.

confronting them. To the south lay our H.Q. which lives in the field but fights a political war. To the south-east lies our capital which has ultimate control over us and directs us wheresoever it wishes, its present desire being that there should be a state of war and no-war. And there far away in New York sits a group composed of eleven men who have decided that the battle in which we live must cease and by whose decision we must abide. I filled my lungs with the sea breeze and returned to my car, picking my way among the corpses that lay scattered near the road and asking myself:

"What next? What has destiny got in store for us?"

#### IV

Before the truce we were in a state of war and no-war. After the truce our state had become one of peace and no-peace. There was a general feeling in our lines that fighting would not be resumed. There is no doubt that the source of this feeling was this myth of a political war. There is also no doubt that appearances helped to reinforce this feeling. We had entered a war without any preparation and failed in each instance to take the normal precautions that an army in wartime should have taken. Our C.O. was subject to instructions issued from Cairo that bore no relation to the requirements of the situation. In New York (where the Security Council was sitting) there were those who could impose silence on our guns by a mere gesture of the hand. As a result of all this, a spirit of indifference began to pervade our positions. From where I was at Isdud as staff officer of the 6th Battalion, I watched this situation with an anxiety that I could scarcely conceal. What increased my anxiety further was that while all this was happening on our side of the fighting line, the other side buzzed with an activity that was the opposite in every detail of our state of affairs.

There was a high tower at Isdud to the top of which I used to climb and strain my eyes in the direction of the enemy lines. No quiet ruled there, no truce prevailed. The daytime showed a constant bustle, and many secrets were betrayed at night in spite of the attempt to hide them behind the screen of darkness. For often at night I used to leave battalion H.Q. which was housed in the concrete building of the Railway Station, and climb the high tower. There I would stay for hours on end, my eyes fixed across our quiet lines at the other side. The lights of the distant settlements were visible from that height, and I could see lights moving to and fro near the settlements. The whole military situation could clearly be seen from the top of that tower. The days when fighting occurred were, as far as we were concerned, days of war and no-war. But to the enemy they were days of war only. The days of truce became to us days of peace and no-peace. But to the enemy they never became days of peace.

Intelligence reached me regularly as to what was happening on the other side of the lines. The situation as it could be read on the map closely approximated to the situation as it appeared from the top of that tower which carried the water tank of Isdud.

On the first day of the truce the enemy moved against the Arab village of 'Abdis which interpenetrated our lines. He moved against Beit Duras. He occupied Juseir, Asluj and Julis. He tried to infiltrate with his convoys through our lines in order to reach the settlements cut off in the southern Negev. The enemy was obviously not taking the truce seriously. To him it was an opportunity for consolidation. Under its cover he hoped to seize dominating sites so that when the truce ended he could commence his operations from positions that were most advantageous for his purposes. The situation was crystal clear to anyone who bothered to cast a glance at the map or to look in the direction of the other side. But there was no indication that our High Command was aware of what was really going on. It appeared that it was industriously absorbed in the writing of detailed histories of what had happened from the day the fighting started until the truce. The outstanding feature of the situation which engaged its attention most and which was described in the minutest details was how the troops had stormed the settlements of the enemy cheering "His Majesty the G. in C." Now this was emphatically what did not happen. The attacking troops were distracted enough by the enemy's fire, and it was impossible that it should even have occurred to any of the men to cheer "His Majesty the G. in C."

The days passed and with their passage my anxieties mounted. I had no particular cause of complaint at Isdud. We had all that we required and even a surplus of it. We spent the days as though we were in our barracks in Cairo. Our laughter filled the trenches and our jokes made the rounds throughout our positions. Some of these jokes which made us laugh should have rather made us cry. One day I came across a private in our battalion and for no particular reason it occurred to me to ask him a question in order to find out how much he understood of what we were doing in Palestine.

I said to him: "What are we doing here, soldier?"

The soldier gave a reply which I shall never forget.

He said: "We are on manœuvres, sir."

I was astounded and said: "Manœuvres... manœuvres where, soldier?"

The soldier replied in the manner of one who is stating a self-evident truth:

"We are on manœuvres at Rubeiki, sir."

The Rubeiki region lay on the way to Suez<sup>22</sup> and was the place where

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<sup>22</sup> Rubeiki is a railway station about midway on the desert line between Cairo and the town of Suez at the Red Sea end of the Canal.



the Egyptian army held its annual *manœuvres*. We were then on *manœuvres* at Rubeiki and not fighting in Palestine. Or so at least thought this private in our battalion. But was he really to blame for this?

I grew restless at H.Q. and went out on a tour of our positions in order to ascertain the mood of the officers. I will not deny that I was really trying to enlist some of them in our Free Officers Organization. In my conversations with the officers I did not come directly to the point. I did not want to distract their minds from their immediate environment, nor to divert their attention from the enemy who was lying in wait for them. My method at that time aimed at two things. First, to win the confidence of those I met and secondly to strengthen my personal relationship with them as much as possible. I was sure — and this has been amply justified by my experience — that trust and personal friendship were certain to turn into something deeper when the opportune moment arose. When I look around me today I see many faces in the Free Officers Organization which I met for the first time in the trenches during that strange period of our lives which we spent in Palestine.

The truce was about to end. The atmosphere of laxity throughout our lines was succeeded by a sense of shame and by prickings of conscience. Belated attempts were made to train the troops. Reports reached us of the imminent arrival of reinforcements preceded by armour.<sup>23</sup> Several conferences were held at our H.Q. to discuss the eventualities at the end of the truce. On the morning of June 28, our battalion was alerted for attack on an unspecified day against an unspecified objective. But there was an odd feeling about all this. We were all supposed to be in earnest. But something, a subtle undertone in the rush of these developments, cast its shadow of doubt. What was happening bore the closest resemblance to earnestness but — and this was the odd thing — there was a false note about it all. For the feeling that the truce was permanent, that fighting would not be resumed, that the war was a political *manœuvre*, was still predominant in the trenches.

At about this time I attended a conference at Brigade H.Q.<sup>24</sup> I still remember that as I sat at the conference table my whole being was filled with the thought that conviction was utterly lacking in the plans that were being drawn up. It occurred to me that I was sitting in front of a stage. All those standing on the stage had perfected their roles and were exerting themselves in playing them. But everyone on the stage knew that it was just a role

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<sup>23</sup> For the armour strength of Egypt, such as it was, see Khalidi, *From Haven to Conquest* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1971), p. 870.

<sup>24</sup> This is presumably the H.Q. of the 4th Brigade Group. Before the resumption of hostilities at the end of the first truce on July 8, the reinforced Egyptian forces had been re-organized under two brigade groups: the 2nd and the 4th. The 2nd Brigade Group now comprised the 4th, 5th and 7th Infantry Battalions, and the 4th Brigade Group the 1st, 2nd, 6th and 9th Infantry Battalions.

that he was playing and that this would come to an end after which he would revert to his original personality. This was all in flat contradiction to the fighting spirit as I conceived it. For to brace yourself for battle and to prepare for it is not merely a role that should be played to perfection. It is a question of life and often enough of death too. But conviction was lacking which is why there was no trace of the authentic fighting spirit.

On June 30, I attended a second conference at Brigade H.Q. in my capacity as staff officer of the 6th Battalion. We were supposed to receive the instructions of our High Command as to the steps to be taken when the truce terminated.<sup>25</sup> The plan was that we should carry out offensive operations along the entire front. As far as our sector was concerned, the 7th Battalion (which had arrived shortly before the truce began) was to advance on and occupy Beit Duras. Our own battalion, the 6th, was to follow up immediately and occupy Sawafir Gharbiya and Sawafir Sharqiya. I was, of course, not supposed to debate the plan. We attended the conference not in order to discuss matters but to receive orders and say that we hear and obey.

But I could not prevent my mind from debating the plan, though I restrained my tongue from uttering a single word in expression of what was revolving in my head. What was going on in my mind was quite simple and straightforward: these targets that we were now drawing up plans to occupy, were, on the day the truce was declared and, of course, long before that, altogether empty of enemy forces. Why had our High Command said nothing about occupying them at that time? Why had it allowed the enemy to occupy these positions during the truce and given him one whole month in which to dig in and consolidate his hold, only to decide after all to attack and occupy them? But this was not all. The enemy had not actually moved into these positions until about a fortnight after the beginning of the truce. Our patrols used to get right up to them and some of these patrols brought back with them quantities of delicious grapes which we called Beit Duras grapes. Why had not one of these patrols been ordered to remain at Beit Duras and occupy it to prevent the enemy from moving in and so save us all this bother of occupying them now. In other words, these positions were there for the taking. But our High Command had preferred to present the enemy with the opportunity of occupying them so that our troops could only recover them by assault.

All these thoughts passed through my mind as I sat in the conference listening but saying nothing. The enemy commander had seized the initiative. That much was clear. It was also clear that our C.O. had failed to realize the importance of the positions which the enemy had been allowed to occupy. Only after their occupation by the enemy had he awoken to their importance

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<sup>25</sup> The four weeks' truce ended on July 8 to be succeeded by ten days of fighting and a second (so-called "shooting truce") as from July 18.

and was now preparing our troops for their capture. Nevertheless, I pushed all these thoughts aside. What mattered now was not what had happened or what should have happened but the actual facts of the situation as they presented themselves.

That day I returned to my battalion full of resolutions. Whatever the circumstances which we encountered, we had to stand on our feet and enter an honourable battle. I wanted to do all that I could for my battalion. I wanted my troops to set the example for all the other units. I knew more than anybody else how bad their morale was, for they had not yet recovered from the attempt on Dangour. But I resolved that we should avoid our past mistakes and take all factors into consideration so that there should be no repetition of what had happened at Dangour.

On the morning of July 1, while the truce was still operative, I went out with the C.O. of our battalion and the officers who were to be in charge of the operations to reconnoitre the ground where the fighting was to take place. But the task was not as easy as we had imagined. We were in fact unable to cast a single glance at either Sawafir Sharqiya or Sawafir Gharbiya. The reason for this was that a stretch of high ground lay between us and the two Sawafirs, hiding them completely from our sight. Moreover, Beit Duras and the Julis camp, both in enemy hands, were perched on the top of this ridge.

I maintained that we had to have information about the objective which we were to attack and that this information should be detailed if the Dangour catastrophe was not to be repeated. On the following day I set out again. I was accompanied by two officers and two sergeants. The officers were the intelligence officer of the battalion and First Lieutenant Ismail Mohieddin, who was in command of the bren-gun carrier. The sergeants were Sergeant Abdul Fattah Sharafuddin, who is now a Sergeant Major in our armed forces and has in my opinion one of the finest records in Palestine, and the other, Sergeant Abdul Hakim, who is now a driver at Munya (when I visited Munya a few months ago, I very much looked forward to meeting him again).

I had a feeling that to occupy Sawafir was going to be a walk-over. Some indefinable instinct told me that the enemy in it was not to be feared. At any rate, here we were on the way to see and reconnoitre the ground for ourselves. We left our two jeeps and started on the more hazardous part of our journey inside enemy lines. We moved through the orchards infiltrating quietly between the trees. The late Ismail Mohieddin (for he was killed soon afterwards) was in the lead. The intelligence officer and myself followed and Abdul Fattah and Abdul Hakim walked on either side of us, each carrying his tommy-gun at the ready. There is no point in giving all the dramatic details for this is not an adventure story but an account of a military operation. Suffice it to say that we managed to reach a forward position which lay in

the middle of the enemy lines and from which we could obtain a clear view of Sawafir Sharqiya and Sawafir Gharbiya.

We spent half a day taking in all that we could see. I scrutinized every bit of Sawafir and considered its pros and cons. The intelligence officer made a detailed sketch of the Julis camp area and the surrounding fortifications. I found confirmation of the earlier opinion that I had formed about the strength of the enemy. As I had expected, the enemy was not in force in Sawafir. All the evidence seemed to corroborate this estimate, even the vines heavily laden with their ripe bunches. For if there had been a major concentration of the enemy at Sawafir these orchards would not be empty nor would the ripe and succulent grapes have remained hanging from the vines.

But our feasting on the grapes was rudely interrupted. We saw an enemy patrol moving in the direction of Nabi Salih where we had left our jeeps. So we hastened on our way back. On the following day we returned to Nabi Salih and were content to stay there. We had had enough of the adventures of the day before. This time I was accompanied by the C.O. of the battalion and all the company commanders. I wanted each one to understand his role in the field. This I thought would achieve two things: it would raise the morale of the battalion through the realization by the officers of our superiority to an enemy about whose numbers and positions they knew everything beforehand. And it would consequently ensure victory for our battalion and so earn it a leading position among the fighting units in the front.

## V.

By July 6, I could boast that of all the units alerted for action at the end of the truce, none understood its task as well as our battalion. Every officer knew exactly what was expected of him and all were ready for action. We were only waiting for the 7th Battalion to move ahead of us and occupy Beit Duras so that we could follow up by moving against Sawafir. But matters did not quite develop in that manner. The 7th was unable to carry out the task set to it. It was not strictly speaking the fault of the battalion. The catastrophe that took place was the result rather of a comic stroke of bad luck. A Sudanese force<sup>26</sup> was supposed to advance and storm Beit Duras in a night attack, relying chiefly on the element of surprise. As soon as it had attained its objective, the Sudanese force was to fire a green success signal after which the 7th Battalion was to move in and consolidate our gains. In case of failure, the Sudanese force was to fire a red signal and retire from Beit Duras to allow our artillery to go into action.

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<sup>26</sup> The force in question was a company in strength. This was one of six Sudanese regular companies that had arrived at the front by the time that hostilities had been resumed.

The Sudanese force succeeded in occupying Beit Duras. But failure was lying in wait at the decisive moment when the signal expected by the 7th Battalion was to be fired. The soldier in charge of this task fired the red instead of the green signal. As soon as the red signal shot up into the sky our artillery started shelling the Beit Duras positions which were still occupied by the Sudanese force. The operation was of course a dismal failure. The Sudanese force hastened to extricate itself, and when the shelling ceased the enemy simply walked into Beit Duras again.

We in the 6th Battalion were maddened by what had happened. For it meant the loss of an opportunity for which we had braced ourselves and of the hopes that we had counted so much on. It also meant the complete waste of the effort that had gone into our planning. But there was not much that we could do about it. We had simply to wait for further developments and hope that another opportunity would present itself and enable us to put our plans into operation.

Presently events were to take a sharp unexpected turn. And I must here be absolutely frank and confess, though six years have elapsed since then, that I found myself in a situation where for the first time I raised my voice in the field against an order given to me by my superiors.

The day was July 9. We were sitting at lunch in our mess at Battalion H.Q. A sergeant walked in and delivered to me a sealed envelope which was addressed to me as staff officer of the battalion. Still eating, I opened the envelope. As my eyes ran along the lines of the message I felt the food stick in my throat. The note comprised the following two lines:

- "1. The 6th Battalion will hand over its positions to the 5th Battalion which is on its way from Gaza.
2. The 6th Battalion will occupy the town of Julis in the early morning of July 10."

The expression on my face must have betrayed my feelings for the other officers suddenly stopped eating and stared in my direction. When I informed them of the contents of the message their reaction was no different from mine.

Once again we were facing a battle for which we had made no preparation. We had no information about the enemy at Julis. How strong was the enemy at Julis? What were his fortifications like? What other units of ours were in the neighbourhood? What roles were assigned to them? We had no time to study our objective as we had done in the case of Sawafir. I started to protest but I knew that it was pointless to do so.

Time was like a sword dangling over our heads. Three hours were left before sunset and they were our only chance to go out while there was still daylight and cast a glance at our objective. I set out immediately together with the C.O. and the company commanders. We moved behind the shelter of

an orange grove and got to about a kilometre from Julis. But we could not stay long there for the enemy discovered our presence and began searching the area with his mortar fire. Daylight was also fleeing more quickly than I had ever known it to do and the sun was dropping into the lap of darkness. We had no alternative but to turn back, and as soon as I reached H.Q. I began drawing up the order for attack.

The enemy had discovered that we had carried out a reconnaissance from the direction of the orange grove. He was certain to expect us to attack from that direction and to lie in wait for us there. Our main attack should therefore come from another direction. I accordingly decided to send a small force to the orange grove to engage the enemy and give him the impression that we had fallen into a trap, while our main attack was to come from the rear across the maize fields.

But our C.O. and I soon clashed over the supporting roles of the artillery and air force.<sup>27</sup> I myself was a firm believer in an orderly programme and a fixed time-table of action. Our C.O. wanted it left to his discretion to call in artillery and air according to the developments of the battle. This manner of conducting warfare was alien to my way of thinking but there was little I could do, particularly when the C.O. told me:

"Look here, old boy, will you please stop this Staff College talk."

Daylight broke over the battlefield and the battle itself. The opening moves were as I had desired and wished but the rest, in fact everything that followed the opening moves, was neither in accordance with what I desired nor with what I wished. Things first began to go wrong when the C.O. suddenly turned to me and said as we stood watching the infantry below us going into the attack:

"What are we doing here? Let us go down and see our men."

The C.O.'s desire, I thought, showed a very praiseworthy sentiment but one which I nevertheless considered to be outside the scope of what was expected of him as the C.O. The duty of a commanding officer is to see to it that he remains in full control of the whole military operation in question. It is not his business to drop the reins and start chasing details in which he gets so immersed that he forgets his duty of leadership when the danger point

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<sup>27</sup> For the strength of the Egyptian air force, see Khalidi, *op. cit.*, p. 868. Supplemental information from the *Secret Report on Military Operations* indicates that this air force comprised (a) six fighter aircraft and one reconnaissance plane in the first-line at Arish, (b) six fighter aircraft, five Dakota transports and one reconnaissance plane at Cairo Base. On May 22, 1948 four of the six first-line fighters were shot down (and their pilots killed) by RAF planes when they inadvertently flew over Ramat David air base near Haifa, still occupied by the RAF after the termination of the Mandate. Khalidi assumed (*op. cit.*, p. 868) that only two of the aircraft had been actually shot down and two only damaged.

is reached. I tried to convince him of this, but he was too carried away with excitement.

We started on our way to where the infantry was concentrating, but sure enough we could not get to them. Our car got bogged down and would not move. So we got off, the C.O., myself, and our escort and started pushing and heaving. I felt I was losing my temper in the same way that I felt we were losing control over the battle. Here we were neither at H.Q. where we could direct the artillery and air support nor even with our advancing infantry.

When we finally did get to our infantry, the good-hearted C.O. began losing control over his nerves. He looked around and saw his men falling, and he began to shout like an enraged bull:

"My men are dying. My men are dying."

I suggested that we should follow the course of the operation from another vantage point and he agreed. But suddenly we came upon four mortars which were waiting their turn in the battle. The C.O. shouted:

"What are these mortars doing here?"

He then gave orders that they should be moved closer to the enemy to bring them within range of Julis. He then turned abruptly on me — the staff officer of the battalion — and said:

"You go along with them."

I looked at him in surprise. My job as staff officer was to remain at his side to help him direct operations and execute the plan that I had drawn up. I felt that the proper direction of an operation in its entirety was a thousand times more important than my setting out with four mortars in a wild gesture of braggadocio. But I was in a delicate situation. I did not wish to contradict my C.O. and so give him the impression that my opposition sprang from my heart rather than from my mind. I merely looked at him meaningfully and said, "Yes Sir." I then set out with the mortars across the maize fields until Julis came within our range.

The mortars started shelling the enemy but I did not hear their din. I was trying to imagine the state of our battalion now that there was no one at its helm. I felt my heart rise in mutiny against myself and my mind rise in mutiny against my C.O. I was satisfied that the mortars were in a safe place and I determined to return and seize the reins before a catastrophe descended on us.

The first officer I met as I was emerging from the maize fields told me that Ismail Mohieddin had been killed. I do not think I have a right to conceal today the simple human feelings that swept over me as I heard this. I will straightaway confess that I lost all control over my feelings and my tears started to fall. I found myself sobbing with a bitterness I had never before experienced in my life. I was weeping for a brave comrade in arms who had

fallen in battle. But I also wept for the battle itself whose reins had been entrusted to the winds.

When I reached H.Q. I found that there was no one responsible there. I asked about the C.O. and was told that he had left for nobody knew where. I started eagerly to go through the messages sent by the companies from their scattered positions all over the battlefield. One message read: "Arrived at objective. Awaiting new orders." Another: "Have run out of ammunition." A third: "Objective reached. Send stretchers." What made matters worse was that these messages had arrived quite some time before. I wondered what had happened to the companies that sent them. How had they faced the situation by themselves without getting any response from their H.Q.? I tried to do what I could. I wanted in particular to get in touch with our forces west of Julis but could get no reply from them. But I soon understood what was happening when a dispatch-rider arrived to say that the C.O. had given his orders to the forces in the west to withdraw and wanted me to withdraw the force attacking from the south.

How was I to withdraw the force in the south? The C.O. had already withdrawn the force that diverted the enemy's attention from the south without giving me or our forces any prior warning. I began to see in clear outline the catastrophe that was hovering over our heads. What made me feel more strongly about matters was that the force delivering the main attack from the west had actually been carrying out its task successfully. I decided at this point to do what I had long contemplated but shrank from doing. I bypassed my immediate superior—the C.O. of the battalion—and got in touch with the C.O. of the brigade to whom I fully explained the situation. Our object had now become not so much to occupy Julis but rather to make desperate efforts to pull our forces out of the trap into which they were about to fall.

I spent a sad night. I felt that our battalion had entirely lost its high morale and was being assailed by all kinds of doubts which made it so much more difficult to lead. On the following morning we received a signal from Brigade H.Q. It read: "The C.O. 6th Battalion will hand over to the second in command. He will himself proceed to Cairo."

I felt really sorry for our new C.O. But there was not much time to feel sorry for anybody for within an hour another signal reached us from Brigade H.Q. which read: "The 6th Battalion will occupy Julis today." I thought this was an impossible thing to do. The new C.O. could not make his mind up. On the one hand, he was convinced of what I told him about the morale of our troops and their general condition. But on the other hand, he hesitated to accept my point of view and oppose the new order. For he did not wish it said that he had inaugurated his new command by showing his fear to go into battle.



I pleaded with him in the following manner: "You really have no choice and at any rate can lose nothing. If you oppose the order there is a possibility, but only just a possibility, that you might be transferred. If you accept the order you may rest assured that victory is impossible, and you will certainly be transferred with failure permanently attached to your name."

The C.O. was convinced and said: "You come along with me to General H.Q."

I said: "Let's go."

As we were entering General H.Q., I saw a sign which said "Air Support Section." I called in at the office and asked if they had any information about Julis. The officer in charge said that they had a collection of aerial photographs of the whole area. When I asked to be shown it the officer promptly put it before me. As I was inspecting the photographs, I was struck by an important point which had escaped our notice. Julis town lay on the slope of the ridge and was of no particular value. What was important, however, was Julis camp which dominated the town from the top of the ridge. Even if we had succeeded in entering Julis, we would have been at the mercy of the enemy, who would have turned Julis town into a cemetery for our forces.

After a short discussion in which I relied on photos that I had come across by sheer accident, General H.Q. was persuaded that to try to occupy Julis was to invite catastrophe and that we would do well to give up the idea.

I returned to my battalion in a state of revolt against everything. I was in revolt against the fact that it was by sheer accident that we had escaped catastrophe. I was in revolt against the valuable information contained in aerial photographs which our air force had taken of the very objective that we were to attack, but which were lying about at General H.Q. with no one thinking of sending them along to us. I was in revolt against the smooth, closely-shaven chins and the smart and comfortable offices at General H.Q., where no one had any idea what the fighting men in the trenches felt or how much they suffered from orders sent out at random. But my state of revolt was pointless. It would have been more profitable for me to spare my nerves for the new battle that we were presently to receive orders to prepare ourselves for.

The new battle was typical of the battles that our men had so far taken part in. It was a battle decided on a map. Somebody at H.Q. looked at a coloured map and felt — with perhaps every reason — that such and such a place was of supreme importance. He thereupon placed his finger on it and sent us orders to occupy it. But he did not send with the orders anything that could help us in our task.

Frankly I did not consider the orders that reached us from H.Q. operational orders in the true sense of the word. I preferred to call them "scraps of paper" and I do not think that I was far wrong in my designation.

## VI.

The new position that we had to occupy was astride the supply line of the complex of settlements that dominated the entrance to the Negev. It was entirely exposed to the fire of the Negba group of settlements<sup>28</sup> and so was the whole length of the route leading to it. The company commander who was supposed to occupy this position came to me and said: "It is mad and stupid to try and capture this place." In my heart of hearts, I was convinced that what he said was not too far from the truth. But I was also conscious of the extreme importance attached to the crossroads.<sup>29</sup> For the whole plan for the occupation of Negba depended for its success on our occupation of this crossroads. I said to the company commander: "I will come along with you."

At three o'clock in the morning, I set out with the company commander and his men. By daybreak we had occupied the crossroads and our men were digging themselves in and standing up splendidly to the enemy fire that was concentrated on them. The battle of Negba had started.

After the company had established itself at the crossroads, I felt that there was no need for my continued presence. I therefore decided to return to Battalion H.Q. At the end of the exposed route leading to the crossroads, I met the brigade staff officer who had come to observe the progress of the operation. He was astonished to see how exposed the route was and that he had to travel in a bren-gun carrier if he wanted to use it in the daylight. I returned with him in his carrier. As we were about to turn back, there happened one of those events that destiny is such a master at contriving. We heard the sound of firing coming from a maize field very close to us. The brigade staff officer said: "Whoever is firing from the maize field seems to think he is the only one around. Let us chase him away." The carrier accordingly descended into the field. Suddenly the firing ceased, and complete silence fell on the place. We probed into the field this way and that, but could not see or hear anything. There was no point in wasting more time in the field and the carrier turned round on its way back to the road. An indefinable inner call warned me against one particular moment on our return journey. This was the moment when the carrier, raising its front to climb on the road again, would expose its top to the full view of whoever was in the maize field behind.<sup>30</sup> Nor was this a figment of the imagination, though I have no idea how I felt it. For at the very moment when the front of the carrier rose above the edge of the road, the firing that had ceased began again and I felt a strange

<sup>28</sup> The Negba strong point was under the command of the Givati Brigade.

<sup>29</sup> The crossroads were vital for movement laterally from west to east along the road from Isdud to Hebron and from north to south (i.e., from central Palestine to the Negev).

<sup>30</sup> Bren-gun carriers are light tracked vehicles with thin armour plating on the sides but no roof. Hence the vulnerability of their exposed top.

feeling in my chest. It was as if something had gently hit it. I looked down and saw my chest bathed in blood. I knew at once that I had been hit. A bullet had gone through my chest near the heart. I took a handkerchief out and tried to stop the flow of blood.

I was filled with the most curious sensation. I was not particularly frightened nor sorry for myself nor sad. My whole being seemed to ask one question: "Is this the end?" I was not even upset by this question, and then, I don't know why it was, for the first time since my arrival in Palestine I remembered my little daughters, Huda and Muna. And I remembered my house and my wife and I wondered how they would all receive the news. I then suddenly remembered my men and wondered what effect the news would have on them and how the battle would develop without me. My heart was filled with a strange calmness and a feeling of contentment and clarity flooded my soul.

I turned to the brigade staff officer who was fidgeting next to me and trying to do everything he could to make me comfortable and asked him to light me a cigarette. I held the cigarette in one hand and pressed the other, still holding the handkerchief, against my chest. I drew one long breath at the cigarette and closed my eyes while the carrier glided briskly towards Majdal Hospital. Many memories flitted across my mind, scenes crowded out of the past — a film of visions, of dreams and hopes: my childhood and youth, my family and home, my two little daughters playing in their room, the Free Officers Organization and the dangers that threatened it, the battle-front with all its trials and horrors, our men and officers and all that they had done and put up with. I opened my eyes once again and drew another long breath at the cigarette while the carrier hastened on its way to the hospital.

I looked in surprise at the doctor who examined me at Majdal Hospital, hardly believing what he was telling me. His account of how I had been hit was too good to be true. I had entered the hospital in the full belief that, considering the extent of my bleeding and the place of my injury, my wound was a deep one and my heart had been affected. When I removed the blood-soaked handkerchief with which I had tried to stop the blood, I looked at the doctor and said:

"Please don't hesitate to tell me the truth."

The doctor began to examine the wound and then started to shake his head in an inexplicable way. I grew restless and urged him to tell me whether it was a deep wound or not. He smiled and shook his head and said:

"You must excuse me. This is an unusual injury." He then asked: "Do you know what has happened?"

I said: "I know at least that I have been hit."

He said: "That is true, but do you know how you have been hit?"

I grew rather impatient with this dialogue and said: "I suppose in the same way as everybody else is hit."

The doctor shook his head in disagreement and said: "It is true that you have been hit, but your injury is a rather unusual one. The bullet seems to have hit the side of your carrier, at which the bullet head became separate from its metal casing. What actually hit you was only the casing and not the bullet head."

I lay on the operating table while he fished in my chest. Within ten minutes he was handing to me bits and pieces of twisted metal saying: "Take these and keep them." I held the pieces of metal in the palm of my hand and contemplated them. As I looked at them, I wondered what would have happened if events had taken a different turn. As I asked myself this question I found my spirit draw closest to its Creator and I found myself muttering in the depths of my heart: "Praise be to God. Praise be to God."

I was the first person to arrive at Majdal Hospital that morning. When I learnt that my injury was a superficial one, the first thought that occurred to me was that I had not eaten anything for a long time. I asked for a cup of tea, and as I sipped it slowly I turned over in my mind the strange circumstances of my escape. The tea that I drank revived my appetite and I felt hungrier than I had ever felt before. I asked for food but was shocked to hear that there was none. "What do you mean," I exclaimed, "I am hungry." They said: "Your battalion is supposed to send you food." I stared at the person who had told me this and said: "My battalion?" I repeated the word over and over again and then suddenly looked at the man and asked: "Where is my battalion?" The question became a compelling one dominating my nerves and my imagination. Where indeed was my battalion? I had left it several hours ago in an unenviable position, scattered and exposed along a wide front. Our High Command had given it orders to penetrate the positions of the enemy and then encircle him. I shook my head as a complete picture of the state in which I had left my battalion filled my mind. I muttered to myself thinking aloud: they told us to penetrate the positions of the enemy and then encircle him. But how could we encircle him when he encircled us? What had happened was only inevitable. When we penetrated into the enemy positions, it was he who encircled us rather than the other way about. But how on earth could we penetrate his positions and encircle him at the same time?

I was awakened from this soliloquy by the voice of the person whom I had asked for food. He was saying: "Well, have you arranged for your battalion to send you food?"

I smiled as I said: "I wish there is somebody to send food to my battalion where it is now."

The man stared at me and said: "What do you mean?"

"Never mind that," I said. "Is there no one who can go to the suq and buy me some food?"

When the soldier returned from the suq with a loaf of bread, five cakes of *tu'miyeh* and a bunch of grapes, I found that my appetite had subsided and that food was the last thing that I desired.

I lay down on the bed utterly exhausted. The physical and mental fatigue of the last few days was beginning to have its effect on me.

Although my body rested on the bed, my mind could not take a rest. I could not give my thoughts even the shortest respite. They were far away with my battalion in the front line positions. What particularly weighed on my conscience was that, as staff officer, I had concentrated all work in my hands. How were things shaping out in my absence? Who had taken over my duties? How did my successor get along with the other officers and the men? Suddenly a voice in me said: "What are you doing here while they are there? Your wound is a superficial one. What do you mean by staying in a hospital just because you have been hit by a few pieces of metal?" I leant on my elbow and tried to heave myself out of bed, but I could not complete the effort and fell back once again on the bed. I was exhausted by the shock of the injury and the loss of blood. I determined to rest for a while and then get up and join my battalion.

But it was not really possible to rest. The hospital was suddenly filled with commotion. Until a few minutes before, I had been its only resident. But the wards began now to fill up. I realized at once that these must be the casualties from the battle of Negba. I sprang from my bed and roamed concernedly among the beds. Majdal Hospital was really a first aid station. Only the slight injuries stayed on, the more severe ones being sent on to Gaza after first aid treatment. But so great was the number of casualties that it could not fulfil its normal functions, and after the first few hours, all new arrivals were being immediately diverted to Gaza.

The scene around me was depressing: uniforms bathed in blood, and moaning and cries of pain which the injured tried manfully to suppress. I came across an officer whose helmet had been pierced by a bullet which had torn through the top of his head. As I inspected his helmet and contemplated the place of his injury, I felt that I was a luckier person than he. I came across another officer who was suffering from nervous shock which had made him delirious. He was young, and I recognized him as a student of mine when I was an instructor at the Military Academy. I remembered the day when he first came to college, still dressed in mufti. I remembered the various stages that he had passed through at the Academy while we tried to make a fighting soldier out of him. Here he was now living through the experience that we had prepared him for.

I could not sleep that night and spent it thinking of those who were around me and those who were far away in the trenches. I thought about war itself. I felt from the depths of my heart that I hated war. Not only this particular war in which we were engaged, but the idea of war itself. I felt that humanity does not deserve the honour of life if it does not strive with all its heart in the cause of peace.